

## CELEBRATING FREEDOM

### Off - Roading Mecca at Crossroads

• **Recreation:** The king of four-wheeler trails, the Rubicon, is so popular that its future is at risk.

By RONE TEMPEST, TIMES STAFF WRITER

LOON LAKE, Calif. --To Shad Sarti, there is no more fitting celebration of American freedom than riding his customized 625-horsepower Toyota monster truck on the Rubicon Trail. A Caltrans highway line striper from Redding, Sarti, 29, was here at the High Sierra trail head for his ninth consecutive Fourth of July weekend. "There is nothing more American than four-wheeling," said Sarti, "and nowhere more American than the Rubicon." The Halloween death mask was already in place on the spare-tire rack. Sarti's wife Renee, 23, unfurled the Confederate flag to fly above the cab. When Renee stripped to her swimsuit, a checklist posted on the back of Sarti's truck trailer was complete: "Beer. Bad Ass Trucks. American Pride. Women Wearing Bikinis." To some, the Independence Day weekend may mean tall ships in Boston Harbor, a parade on Main Street or fireworks over a darkened baseball diamond. But the Sartis and hundreds of others find the essence of America with an annual pilgrimage to one of the nation's most famous four-wheel trails. "This is Christmas in the summer for four-wheelers," said Will Coelho, 22, who was with friends from Walnut Creek. "You can be as loud as you want here and drink as much as you want." The rugged dirt path from the western Sierra Nevada to Lake Tahoe is holy ground for the millions of Americans who enjoy off-road driving. By day's end Sunday, 2,000 to 3,000 people are expected to have lumbered and careened on some part of the 22-mile pathway that has earned a "most difficult" Class-10 rating from the expanding off-road community. "The Rubicon is the crown jewel of off-roading," said Del Albright, a retired California Forestry Department firefighter. He holds the title "trail boss" for the Friends of the Rubicon, a recently mustered organization dedicated to keeping the mountain trail open for four-wheelers, motorcycles, mountain bikes and equestrians. "This is the oldest and hardest continuous four-wheel-drive trail in the world," said Dan Mainwaring of Georgetown, Calif., president of Jeepers Jamboree, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary as host of an annual Rubicon trail rally. "Most people feel that if you haven't done the Rubicon, you haven't

four-wheeled." In 1953, the former Indian foot trail and stagecoach route was the setting for the country's first organized four-wheel-drive event. Flat granite and boulder-strewn sluices provide a dream venue for those who love to test machine against nature. The U.S. Army's super-secret Delta Force trained here before leaving for Afghanistan. Chrysler Corp. sponsors several annual promotional excursions for Jeeps on the trail. The company recently announced a 2003 Rubicon model of its Jeep Wrangler. The Rubicon's renown has never been greater. But its problems have become so obvious that they are acknowledged not just by environmentalists, but even by mainstream off-road organizations. Like many of America's favorite off-road venues, the Rubicon is in danger of being loved to death. Pressure from the estimated 70,000 off-roaders who make the pilgrimage here each summer is taking a toll. The delicate mile-high terrain is scarred from renegade drivers who leave the main trail. Human waste fouls the path. And erosion has become so extreme that a regional water agency last year temporarily banned use of the trail to protect runoff bound for Lake Tahoe. The Rubicon symbolizes the predicament faced by many California forest areas under increasing pressure from a recreation-crazed populace. According to the state Department of Parks and Recreation, 3.5 million Californians, representing 14% of all households, participate in some form of motorized off-road activity. Extreme sports television marketing urges Americans to confront nature rather than passively enjoy it: A lake is not simply a lake; it is a water challenge. A stream is not something in which to languidly dangle a toe; it is a barrier, it is to be forded. Said Daphne Greene, head of the state Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission: "It is extremely difficult to educate the off-road community when you turn on the TV and you see a vehicle crashing through the air and slamming through meadows and rivers." "The reality is that more trails will be shut down," said Greene, a Gov. Gray Davis appointee who owns her own San Rafael off-road consulting company, "because people think this kind of behavior is acceptable." Rubicon veterans in the Sierra foothills are perplexed about how to go about saving the famous trail while keeping it open for public use. "Part of the problem is that the Rubicon is so popular that on some weekends it gets overloaded," said Mark Smith, a 75-year-old former lumberjack, who is considered one of the fathers of American off-roading. After helping start the first Jeepers Jamboree in 1953 as part of a Georgetown Chamber of Commerce campaign to attract tourists to the Sierra foothill community, Smith has gone on to build a sizable business as an off-road consultant to Chrysler's Jeep division, the U.S. military and others. Smith led an effort 15 years ago to get the trail declared an "unmaintained county road" in hopes that it would help protect it against environmental restrictions. He strongly defends continued use of the Rubicon and opposes any type of

permit system that would restrict access to off-roaders. "This is one trail they can't take away from us," Smith said. But like other old-timers, Smith said he is concerned by a new breed of renegade off-roaders who come to the trail intent on destruction. They stage "bash-athons," flinging their vehicles into as many obstacles as possible, and "stacking" events--piling vehicles one on top of another. On Thursday, despite signs warning drivers away from wetlands, deep tire grooves were obvious in several marshy lakeshore areas. "The last four years, there have been a lot of these people coming here, abusing our trail," agreed Mainwaring, who replaced Smith as president of Jeepers' Jamboree. "Law enforcement has to get tougher." In addition to the growing lawlessness that includes use of firearms and excessive drinking, the Rubicon also faces considerable sanitation and environmental challenges. The most difficult may be what to do about the estimated 75,000 pounds of human waste produced during the course of a single summer. Other than encouraging people to pack their waste out with them, no solution has been offered. The terrain is too rocky to dig effective latrines and too remote to maintain portable toilets. Erosion also poses a potential problem, particularly on the Lake Tahoe side of the trail. After complaints that sediment from the trail was spewing into Lake Tahoe, a regional water board issued a violation notice to Placer County in December 2000. But the notice was withdrawn a year later after an extraordinary volunteer effort in which trail true believers turned out en masse to rebuild a portion of the Rubicon to prevent sediment from spilling into a feeder creek. Albright, the "trail boss," and another crew of volunteers were on the trail again this week, ahead of the July 4 onslaught. They drained mudholes and put up barriers to block bypasses used by some renegade drivers. Because of the trail's history and the strong community support to keep it maintained, the Rubicon has never been a cause celebre for environmentalists the way, for example, the now-banned Barstow-to-Las Vegas desert race was a decade ago. When three environmental groups filed a federal lawsuit in February against the El Dorado National Forest, demanding that off-road trails be clearly marked, they were careful to point out that they were not targeting the Rubicon. "At least on the Rubicon, people have acknowledged the problems and are trying to solve them," said Karen Schambach, director of the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation and one of the plaintiffs in the suit. "I'd be happy if the other trails got as much attention." David Widell, the governor's appointee who heads the state Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division, contends that the Rubicon is too powerful a cultural and political icon for a direct confrontation between off-roaders and environmentalists. "The Rubicon," Widell said, "isn't just another designated trail. This is the 1,000-pound gorilla. Mix that with Lake Tahoe and you have a complicated political situation. The fortunate part is that,

with something this big, it forces people to deal with the issue at a higher level of thought, rather than just shutting it down." The recent El Dorado lawsuit and the water board action were wake-up calls for California off-road enthusiasts, many of whom already felt themselves under siege. Over the last 18 months, off-road closures have hit a trail at Surprise Canyon, near Death Valley National Park, and at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreational Area east of Brawley. The Surprise Canyon closure was ordered when the U.S. Interior Department determined that off-road vehicle use was damaging habitat, including that of the endangered Mojave desert tortoise. At the Imperial dunes north of the Mexican border, the shutdown of an area popular with dune buggy enthusiasts was designed to protect Peirson's milk vetch, an endangered plant that grows only in the Imperial Valley desert. "When Surprise Canyon shut down," Greene said, "I thought, 'Oh, God! The Rubicon could be next.' " But, at least for now, the Rubicon roars on. By late Thursday morning, several dozen spectators had already gathered at a famously difficult part of the Rubicon Trail called Little Sluice Box. Some sat in lawn chairs drinking beer and shouting encouragement and criticism as Tim Williamson of Turlock bent the front drive shaft of his new Jeep Wrangler. Such a blow might be devastating to many people, but Williamson accepted it with a shrug. "The truck just slipped and landed flat on my dern drive shaft," said Williamson, 30, whose 4-year-old son was in the cab with him at the time. The boy also seemed unfazed. In fact, he had the look of a future off-roader himself. "Heck, that boy's first word was 'twisted' (an off-road term)," said his father. "All he plays with at home are monster trucks that he drives over rocks and ramps."

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